Strategies to Address Moral Distress



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UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING MORAL DISTRESS

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OVERVIEW

- Introduction
- Stress of conscience
- Moral distress mapping
- Group discussion

MORLEY ET AL (2019):

“Moral distress is the experience of psychological distress that is causally related to a moral event and is offered in response to moral:

- **constraints**
- **conflicts**
- **dilemmas**
- **uncertainty**
- **tension”**

“Why do I feel so bad about something I love so much?”

THE “STRESS OF CONSCIENCE”

- Living up to others’ expectations
- Living up to your own expectations
- Having enough time for everyone/thing
- Lowering your aspirations

DIMENSIONS OF MORAL SENSITIVITY

Interpersonal Orientation

Developing & honoring trusting relationships

Expressing benevolence

Being morally motivated to “do good”

Structuring Moral Meaning

Regularly reflecting on decisions & actions

KHERBACHE, MERTENS & DENIER

Challenges to Principlism

Patient/provider autonomy
Legal guardrails/barriers
Disagreement among stakeholders

Care Ethics

“The solution to a moral problem does not lie in judging actions on the basis of moral principles, but in intensifying relationships and enhancing empathic involvement.”

DIMENSIONS OF MORAL SENSITIVITY

Modifying Autonomy

Recognizing importance of self-choice and associated limitations

Moral Conflict

Feelings/intuition as well as cognitive perception of what ought to be done

Rules

Basing decisions on standards/best practice

THE RESIDUE OF DISTRESS

“That which each of us carries with us from those times when in the face of moral distress we have compromised ourselves or allowed ourselves to be compromised.”

- Webster et al, 2000

- **Integrated into our thoughts and views of ourselves**
- **Each time a distressing situation occurs, the level of residual distress rises**

KHERBACHE, MERTENS, & DENIER

“Moral distress is shaped by multiple contexts, including the socio-political and cultural context of the workplace environment.”

Consider instances where you felt “exposed to factors that can stunt (the) ability to act according to (your) own professional and ethical values.”

THE MORAL DISTRESS MAP

	Emotions	*Source(s)*	*Constraints*	*Conflicting Responsibilities*	*Possible Actions*	*Final Action*
Case						

THE MORAL DISTRESS MAP

We begin with emotions to:

- **Acknowledge pain**
- **Provide context**
- **Review strategies for future**

Ex: sadness, frustration, anger

We examine the source, which can be:

- **Patient-based**
- **Unit/team-based**
- **Organization-based**

Ex: inadequate staffing

THE MORAL DISTRESS MAP

We name the constraints, specifying if they are:

- Internal
- External
- Both

Ex: fear that concerns are unjustified

We identify responsibilities in conflict:

- Value X vs value Y
- Obligation X vs obligation Y
- Responsibility X vs Responsibility Y

THE MORAL DISTRESS MAP

We consider possible actions that will:

- Improve patient outcomes
- Exercise your coping mechanisms (even through small actions)

We review the final action:

- Did you fulfill your responsibility?
- Did you exercise moral agency?

BOUNDARIES

How did you learn to establish/maintain boundaries?

When might it be difficult to maintain boundaries?

What makes a boundary reasonable?



CONCEPTUAL TRAPS

1. Do you ever feel as though you are part of the “why” the system is less than optional?

2. Do you subconsciously want to take people further than you've taken yourself?

3. Do you adhere to the “80/20” – giving patients 80% and yourself 20%?

YOUR ROLE VS THE ENTIRE PRODUCTION

Cause

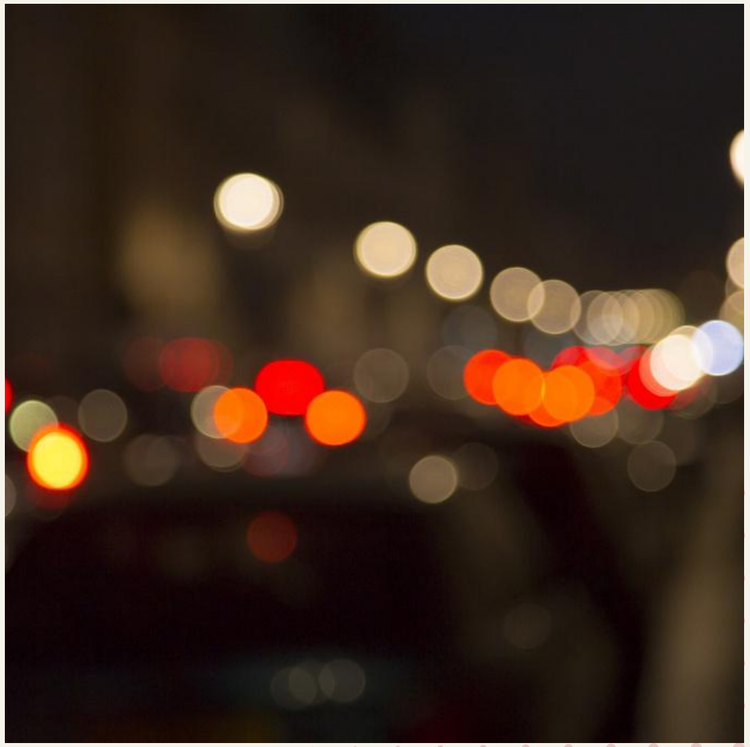
Social determinants of health
Previous suffering/injury
Community limitations

Symptom

Inconsistent medication adherence
Inappropriate behavior
Street injuries

“We often find ourselves racing to keep up with all our tasks without having time to reflect on the deeper meaning of our vocation. The load we are carrying increasingly exceeds our carrying capacity.”

-Wicks & Donnelly, 2021



Broaden and Build Theory

"How do people's fleeting and subtle pleasant states pave the way to their later success, health, and longevity?"

"When momentary positive emotions were disentangled from general life satisfaction, it was the momentary emotions that remained predictive. This very specifically supports the core tenet of the broaden-and-build theory: The short-term cognitive and attentional effects of positive emotions are what lead to gradual, long-term growth."

- Fredrickson et al, 2008

FLIPPING RESILIENCE ON ITS HEAD



Does resilience suggest it is the provider's character flaw?

"If you were more resilient,

you would feel better?"

There are barriers to increasing resiliency in an environment that creates the opposite.

We have created *wounded healers.*

RECURRENT POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Allow us to build consequential personal resources

Ex: love, joy, gratitude, contentment, hope, pride, interest, amusement, awe

Feelings of self-acceptance and stronger relationships with others

RECURRENT POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Broaden our attention and thinking

Cognitively:

afford the ability to mindfully attend to the present moment

Psychologically:

allow maintaining a sense of mastery over challenges

Socially:

increase ability to give/receive emotional support

Fredrickson et al, 2011

LOVING KINDNESS MEDITATION

- **Train your mind**

  Increase feelings of warmth & caring for self & others

- **Open your heart**

  Focus on warm & tender feelings (rather than focusing on the present)

- **Think of yourself**

  Extend warm feelings to yourself

- **Think of others**

  Begin by focusing on heart region and contemplate a person for whom you already feel warmth/tenderness, then widen the circle

- **Think of community**

  Extend warm feelings to community

What to Do With “Overload”

- Identify a responsibility partner “borrowed hope” concept)
- Accept there is no reward for speed in self-care
- Prioritize searching, so you can actually find
- Find - rather than reject - help
- Look for signals you send yourself as opposed to waiting for symptoms
- Define responsibility: *to* vs *for*

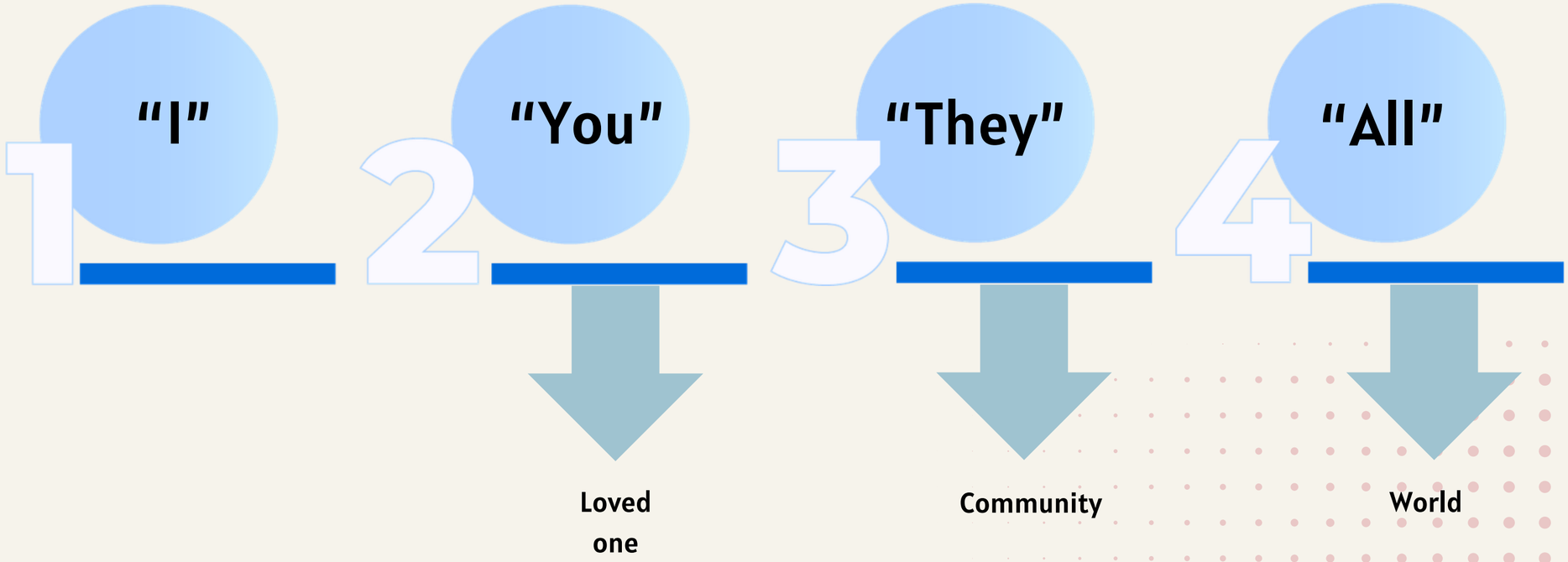
May I be safe

May I be happy

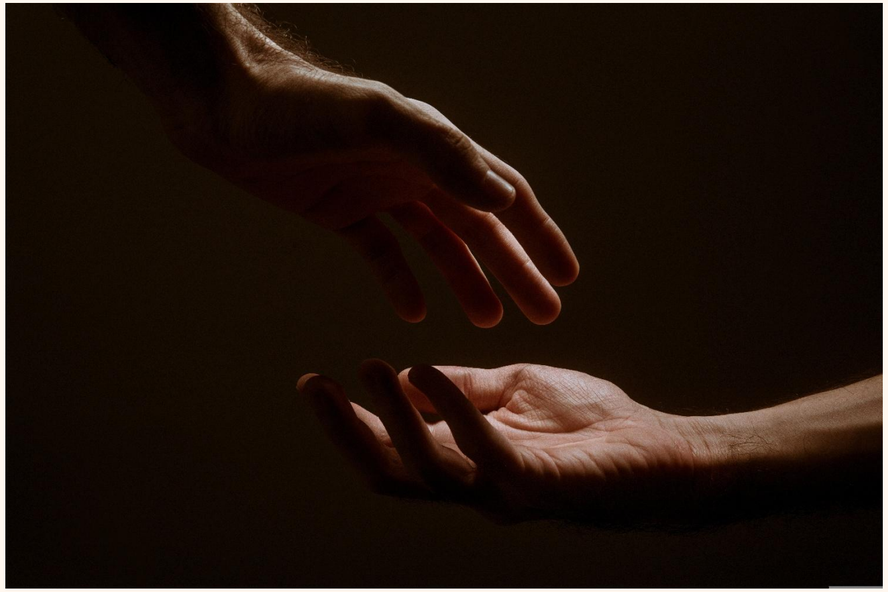
May I be healthy

May I live in peace, no matter what I am given

May my heart be filled with love and kindness



I’ve invited you to dance



I will let you lead.

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